



Student Opinions Towards a Six-Week English Programme in the United Kingdom

Sripathum Noom-ura
Language Institute, Thammasat University, Thailand
sripathum.n@gmail.com

Abstract

Studying abroad can be a very beneficial opportunity for a learner in terms of academic, language, cultural, and life experience. This study aims to survey the opinions of twenty-eight university students towards a six-week English programme run by the Centre for Global Programmes (CGP), University of York, UK. Pre- and post-course survey questionnaires were used to gauge the students' expectations and their level of satisfaction with the five main components of the programme. Two regular teachers of the course also rated their perceptions towards each component of the course through a parallel questionnaire. In addition, two students who had experienced a similar programme at other two different institutions in two different countries in an earlier year were interviewed to provide more insightful information concerning learning opportunities, daily life and weekend, and host families and culture. The results showed that the students' expectations were mostly met, although student and teacher perceptions varied slightly.

Keywords: studying abroad, expectations, satisfaction, intensive course, speaking skills, increased confidence, pre-post course surveys

1. Introduction

Background

The Language Institute of Thammasat University (LITU), perceiving the beneficial opportunities for students to learn English and gain more through immersion in an English-speaking environment, has been organizing English summer camps in the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand for over twenty years. The long-term continuation of the programme has proven the satisfaction of the students participating in the programme. However, in 2014, LITU started to cooperate and establish a new programme with the Centre for Global Programmes (CGP), University of York, UK, and twenty-five students attended the programme. In 2015, twenty-eight students participated, and in order to gain more precise and insightful information about students' opinions towards the programme, the researcher, as a chaperon of the students, wanted to find out which aspects or components of the programme highly satisfied the students and which aspects of the programme need change. In other words, this study plays a part in the programme evaluation for future improvement.

Generally speaking, students who voluntarily participate in an international programme usually expect to, first of all, improve their English-language skills. They also want to blend into a new environment where they learn about a new culture, make new friends, widen their perspectives, and create more future-career opportunities. Many hope there will be a campus society, where they can participate in the academic community, in sports events and in cultural activities. The programme components were set up to fulfill such expectations.

1.1 Components of the Programme

In the CGP Student Handbook, it clearly states: “the main aim of this programme is to enhance your English-language skills and broaden your cultural horizons in order to give you a better understanding of intercultural differences between Thailand and the UK. It also focuses on developing your employability and transferable skills as well as your academic study skills through IELTS preparation.” The programme is comprised of five main components: English-Language Enhancement, Culture, Employability Skills, Project, and Academic IELTS Study Skills.

The programme also sets the assessment criteria by giving a weight of 20% each to the project content, presentation skills, employability-skills interview, reflective journals, and class participation. It also provides rubrics for each component in the Student Handbook so that students can review the criteria of how they will be evaluated.

The five components of the syllabus and the assessment method set out by CGP are objectively in accordance with language-acquisition theory and many previous research findings. The features of each element follow.

Component 1: English-Language Enhancement

This component aims to “enhance students’ English-language skills through an integrated skills context-based approach with a focus on effective communication, increase students’ accuracy in grammar and pronunciation, and enlarge students’ range of vocabulary.” The four skills are developed using a topic-based approach. Each topic involves reading and/or listening followed by discussion and a subsequent writing activity. Language accuracy is developed through correction of grammatical forms and pronunciation errors that arise out of communication activities.

Component 2: Culture and Visits

The aims of this component are to “give students a better understanding of the cultural differences between Thailand and the UK, broaden students’ cultural horizons, raise their international awareness, and increase their sensitivity to UK culture.” This component provides opportunities for discussion and also organizes cultural visits to Leeds, Whitby, Harewood House, Fountain’s Abbey, and Ripon. Students are required to keep a written journal, which is to serve dual purposes: raising students’ awareness of cultural aspects by drawing on local UK resources and their own culture, and increasing students’ ability to express their opinions on various abstract and cultural topics.



Component 3: Employability Skills

This component aims to develop key skills required for communication in an international environment. Students are trained to be familiar with job-interview skills, develop team-work skills, creativity, time management, leadership, and critical thinking.

Component 4: Project and Presentation Skills

This component aims to “introduce students to designing and writing a questionnaire, gathering, collecting and interpreting data on an aspect of British society.” Students have opportunities to contact members of a local population in order to carry out a small-scale research project. Students are then assessed on an effective presentation highlighting significant points and relevant supporting details.

Component 5: Academic IELTS Study Skills

This component aims to “introduce the format and structure of the academic IELTS exam, develop students’ strategies for dealing with each section of the exam”, and students also have an opportunity to take an institutional practice IELTS exam and get constructive feedback on their performance.

1.2 Benefits of Studying Abroad

According to Dwyer (2004), ‘a well-planned, intensive summer program of at least six weeks duration can have a significant impact on student growth across a variety of important outcomes.’ In her studies, full-year students gained more, but some dominant aspects that short-term students dramatically gained included increased self-confidence, reinforced commitment to foreign-language study, acquired skill sets that influenced their career path, being influenced to seek out a greater diversity of friends, better understanding of one’s own cultural values and biases, and having a lasting impact on their world view.

It has been generally agreed that learning a language in the environment where students integrate in an international setting is beneficial. As Hopkins (1999, p.36) stated, “study-abroad programs take many forms, but all share the characteristic that, by their very nature, they provide students with a healthy dose of experiential learning. Immersing oneself in another culture provides new opportunities for learning-by-doing, virtually twenty-four hours a day.” The six-week programme at CGP seems very short, but the opportunities to stay with host families and attend classes of English-speaking teachers intensively and daily act as a great experience enhancement for students in many ways. Also, the assessment that puts an emphasis on reflective journals, presentation skills, employability-skills interviews, and project presentations should help students formulate positive growth, readying them for academic and professional purposes.

To investigate aspects of benefits students gain from the programme, a brief literature review discussion follows.

1.2.1 Language-Skills Enhancement

Theoretically, acquiring a second or foreign language (L2) involves many factors. First of all, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of human learning (Vygotsky, 1978) proposes that a person learns everything on two levels: learning from social interaction with others, and then integrating that learning into the individual's mental structure. His theory of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) could help explain Thai learners and L2 acquisition. The English proficiency of many has not yet matured from class learning, but is waiting to be developed in supporting or favourable conditions, for instance, being in an English speaking country, where they interact in English with teachers genuinely and get assistance, or they socialize with local people who may be ready to understand or may help with pronunciation, enabling them to develop integrative motivation, that is, trying to be a native-like English person, etc. The opportunities to live, even for a short period, in an L2-dominant environment, conversing and engaging in English language-related activities such as buying food, traveling on trains and buses, and shopping on a day-to-day basis should facilitate the conceptual and internalization process of language acquisition of an individual learner.

Secondly, the intensity of formal classroom-learning gives abundant opportunities for language input and output. Although the main objectives of the 'English-Language Enhancement' component at CGP are pretty much similar to the ones in Thai classes (i.e. language-skills development, accuracy in grammatical structure and pronunciation, and vocabulary development), the total quantity of exposure in two contexts is apparently different. While at CGP students attend class 5 hours a day, 5 days a week for 6 weeks, in Thailand they meet in a three-hour class only once a week and, in the worst case scenario, in some classes they accomplish some activities using their mother tongue because it seems to them useless to endure the complexity of a task in addition to L2 language barriers when the task can be easily done in L1. Thus, while abroad, increased exposure to formal optimal input, which is usually deliberately designed to encourage acquisition, should help students reach language learning goals more easily. Krashen, (2009, p.59), stated that "the value of second-language classes lies not only in the grammar instruction but in the simpler 'teacher talk' or the comprehensible input. It can be an efficient place to achieve at least the intermediate levels rapidly..." Moreover, unlike outside-class situations, students cannot simply walk away without any output even when feeling incapable of doing something. Typically, teachers expect students to interact with them while they attempt to understand the language acquirers regardless of their grammatical mistakes, poor accent and pronunciation, or hesitancy. When students try to 'talk', as Swain (1993) indicates, they are making 'comprehensible output' for successful communication. They adjust, rephrase, try different words, and learn by noticing a gap between what they know and what they lack and striving to modify and internalize how the language works. The inevitable requirements for both input and output in classroom settings certainly help enhance the skills acquisition necessary for communication.

1.2.2 Cultural Awareness

To communicate in international settings, it is essential that students be made aware of cultural implications and differences. Language and culture are ingrained in



each other. The ways people act, speak, value, and believe are dominated by the patterned and accepted norms of a particular society, and they express all activities through language, either verbal or non-verbal. Sensitivity to individual differences helps students avoid offending or misunderstanding others, and engaging in inappropriate interactions with people in the host country. To give some concrete examples, many Thai students are not aware that showing up late for class even for a few minutes or free-riding in group-work activities is unacceptable classroom behaviour. Some do not even notice a queue when boarding a bus or buying a burger and drink; they just want to jump in as quickly as possible. Others regard saying 'thank you' to a bus driver as peculiar, while not saying thanks is frowned upon by the driver and other passengers. These students really need a few days to blend in and become competent, not only in terms of language use but also in terms of cultural concepts. When they observe, respect and behave in more acceptable ways, they are exercising their adaptability and sensitivity. Williams (2005) cited Kim (1991, p.286) that adaptability is "the individual's capacity to suspend or modify some of the old cultural ways, to learn and accommodate some of the new cultural ways, and to creatively find ways to manage the dynamics of cultural difference/unfamiliarity, intergroup-posture, and the accompanying stress." She also cited Ting-Toomey (1999, p.261) that two essentials to effective intercultural interactions are concerned with adaptability and sensitivity. Ting-Toomey explains that communicators learn to "mutually adapt to each other's behaviors appropriately and flexibly" by respectfully observing and reacting to another's communication processes. In this case, if students are not observant, it is very helpful and beneficial when teachers point out or discuss cultural and traditional differences in class. As Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, and Hubbard (2006) conclude: "At a time when most countries in the world are experiencing increasing cultural diversity and the world of business is becoming increasingly global, it is imperative that our schools prepare students to deal effectively with people having cultural orientations that differ from their own."

1.2.3 Preparation for Further Study

The component "Academic IELTS Study Skills" is a potentially fruitful addition for students who are planning to pursue postgraduate study in the UK or elsewhere. This group of students, applying to take a short summer-course instead of merely enjoying vacation or holidays in a foreign country, may have some academic passions for further their studies in the future. An IELTS exam is often part of an admission screening process by many non-American universities. Students need to undergo proper preparation and gain some insightful strategies to assist in yielding acceptable test scores.

IELTS (2002, p. 22) made recommendations that if an IELTS candidate expects to gain improved IELTS scores, he/she may need up to 200 additional study-hours to improve by one IELTS band; besides, score gains vary with candidate individual characteristics such as motivation, age, educational background and first language.

Elder and O'Loughlin (2003) recommend that intensive English study contributes to easier attainment of the required global score and sub-skills. Learners

can possibly move up from a score of band 5.5 to band 7 in three months. Six weeks and approximately 150 hours of formal study at CGP should help the students make some progress.

1.2.4 Career-Path and Life-Skills Development

Students who apply to join this programme probably already have some degree of self-motivation and independence. Studying abroad, even for a short period of time, requires students to negotiate challenges by applying problem-solving skills, team-work skills, time management and leadership.

Tamas (2014) reported various reasons why students view studying abroad as having more advantages. Some of the reasons are: higher quality of education, development of language skills, opportunities to find jobs in a transnational company, exploring a new culture, and gaining various new and unforgettable experiences. In a study by Crhanová (2007), studying abroad is described as having positive impacts on students' personal and professional lives. Many students in the study stated that exchange programmes are some of the most valuable experiences in their lives. A studying-abroad experience enhances one's confidence and offers opportunities to learn new skills, to see the world from new perspectives and perhaps challenge ideas or perceptions that may have always been taken for granted. Some students join in activities such as local festivals or sports that are quite different in the host surroundings. Others join activities that enhance work-placement opportunities. The experience helps shape their academic and/or professional careers, and personal growth. With studying abroad-experience, students are likely to possess stronger interpersonal skills, and employers nowadays consider interpersonal skills the most important qualification of a potential job candidate (Doorbar, 2003).

1.3 Student Expectations and Satisfaction

Although LITU and CGP have a memorandum of understanding that agrees to provide the best possible experience to students who join the programme, there need be some evidence that the students' needs and what they get are up to expectations. This study aims to shed light on how students perceive the programme, and better understanding of student perceptions of the programme quality and standards should lead to the possibility of more effective relationships within and across the institutions.

'Expectation' is typically defined as pre-experience beliefs before the actual experience that a person encounters later. 'Satisfaction' is a person's feelings of pleasure or disappointment resulting from comparing what he/she gets in relation to his or her expectations (Kotler, 2003, p.36). The type of service or programme of the summer course provided by LITU and CGP concerns a quality of a 'no need to mention' level. The programme aims to give the best to students. However, it is worthwhile to know whether students' expectations and their satisfaction are met in case that there is a gap necessitating the programme improvement.



2. Methodology

2.1 Objectives of the Study

This current study aims to 1) seek student opinions of the programme regarding their expectations, and 2) investigate their satisfaction to find out whether their expectations have been met.

2.2 Participants

The participants of this study were twenty female and eight male university students who applied to attend a six-week English programme at CGP from June 29th to August 7th, 2015. Pre- and post-surveys were used to gauge their expectation and satisfaction levels towards the five main components of the programme.

A parallel questionnaire was also given to two regular teachers of the programme to rate their perceptions towards each component.

Lastly, two students who had experienced a similar programme at two different institutions in two different countries were interviewed. One of the interviewees had experienced a short course in Vancouver, Canada, and another had attended a short course in Canterbury, UK in the previous year.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The pre-post surveys are a parallel questionnaire comprising three main parts.

Part 1 concerns general information of the participants of the study and how they rated their own English skills before and after the programme.

Part 2 is a 5-rating scale of 80 questionnaire items, which focus on details of each component. The main concerns of this part are students' opinions towards the syllabus, i.e. the five main components of the programme and the assessment, students' perceptions on improvement of their four skills, and self-satisfaction. Items 1-24 involve development of each skill; items 25-55 are concerned with the programme's five components; and items 56-80 ask for students' opinions about university life and their level of self-satisfaction.

Part 3 is for student and teacher open-ended opinions.

The questionnaire was administered twice: 1) pre-course survey, aiming to seek the students' expectations and 2) post-course survey, aiming to gauge their satisfaction. However, the questionnaire was given to the two teachers only once, after the programme has ended. Lastly, the two students who had experienced a similar situation before were interviewed a few days before the programme ended.

The analysis of the questionnaire responses are of five levels of expectation and satisfaction. The mean scores range as follow: 4.51-5.00 (very high), 3.51-4.50 (high), 2.51-3.50 (moderate), 1.51-2.50 (low), and 1.00-1.50 (very low).

3. Results

The findings of this study cover three main parts: the questionnaire responses from students, the questionnaire responses from teachers, and the student interview.

3.1 Results from Student Survey Questionnaires

This part of the findings is presented in three main sections: 1) overall picture of student expectations and satisfaction towards the programme; 2) students' opinions towards the five main components of the syllabus, and assessment; and 3) other benefits the students gained from the programme. The last section is divided into three sub-categories: students' opinions concerning university life, students' perceptions of their English-skills improvement, and students' self-satisfaction.

3.1.1 Overall Opinions Towards the Programme

The overall expectation level before the programme began was on average high ($\bar{X} = 4.27$), and the student satisfaction level with the programme when it ended was slightly lower but also on average high ($\bar{X} = 3.90$), as shown in Figure 1.

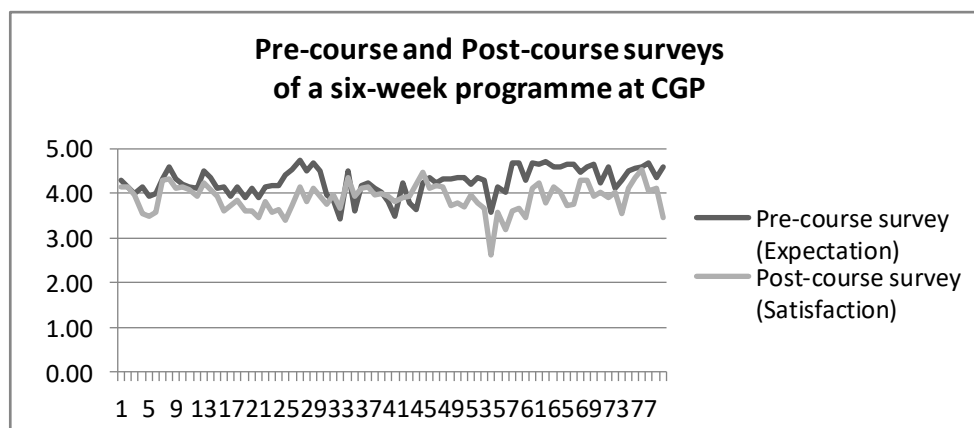


Figure 1. Level of expectations and satisfaction with the six-week programme

3.1.2 Student Opinions Towards Syllabus and Assessment

The levels of expectation of and satisfaction with the five main components and the assessment of the programme were on 'high' average; the mean scores of all components were higher than 3.51 and the detailed mean-score of each component follows in Figure 2.

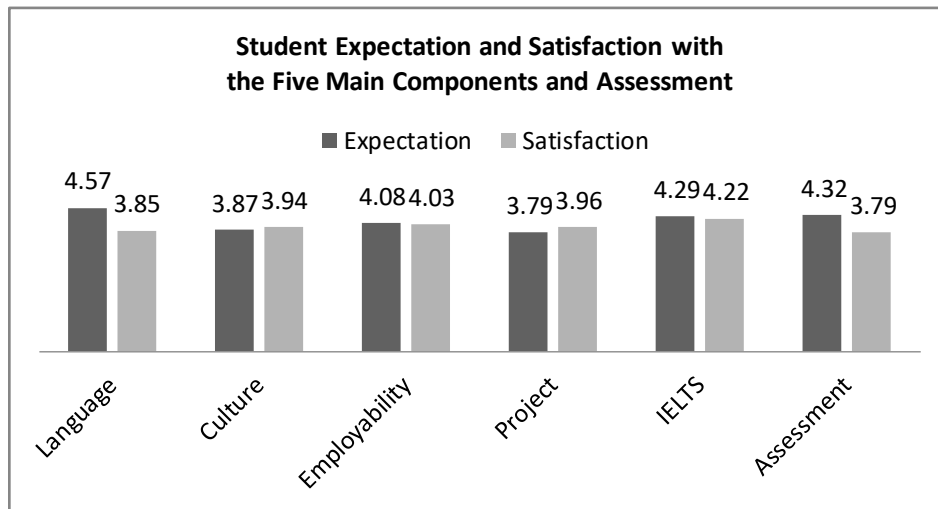


Figure 2. Student opinions towards the syllabus and assessment

The Culture and Project components were rated higher in the post-course survey, while Employability and IELTS components were rated very close in terms of expectations and satisfaction. The only component with a ‘very high’ level of expectation was English-Language Enhancement, and the students rated their satisfaction significantly lower. To illustrate in more detail, in the pre-course survey the items that were rated ‘very high’ involved ability to correct one’s own pronunciation, enlarge one’s vocabulary, and communicate more effectively, but all of these and other items were rated ‘high’ in the post-course survey.

Comparatively, the highest mean-score of satisfaction (4.22) went to the IELTS Study Skills. The students rated the items about understanding format and structure of the IELTS exam, strategic development of each section, opportunity for a mock test, and getting feedback at a similarly ‘high’ level in both pre- and post-surveys. The Culture and Project components were rated higher in the post-course survey, while the assessment was rated lower.

When judged by the mean scores, the highest level of satisfaction went to IELTS, followed by Employability, Project, Culture, Language Enhancement, and Assessment.

3.1.3 Other Benefits

The following are the responses of the students about some other benefits gained from the programme. They fit into three categories: university life, English-skills improvement, and self-satisfaction.

3.1.3.1 University Life

Some aspects of university life were asked about in the questionnaire because they were labelled on the university website. The students' responses are in Table 1.

Table 1. Student expectations and satisfaction related to university life

You can...	Expectation (Pre)		Satisfaction (Post)	
	\bar{X}	Meaning	\bar{X}	Meaning
-enjoy educational facilities (e.g. computer, library, wi-fi, etc.)	4.29	high	3.68	high
-enjoy sports facilities of the university	3.57	high	2.61	moderate
-enjoy activities and events run by CGP	4.14	high	3.57	high
-participate in activities and events of YUSU	4.04	high	3.18	moderate
-get good attention in case of emergency/illness/accident	4.68	very high	3.61	high
-get fair treatment in terms of equality and diversity	4.68	very high	3.68	high
-make a complaint in case of experiencing emotional, psychological, or mental-health difficulties	4.29	high	3.46	moderate
Average	4.25	high	3.40	moderate

Two items were rated 'very high' in the pre-course survey: i.e. the students expected to get good attention in case of emergency, illness or accident, and to get fair treatment in terms of equality and diversity. In the post-course survey, they rated the items rather lower.

Similarly, they rated their expectations for being able to make complaints in case of experiencing emotional, psychological, or mental-health difficulties as 'high' while rating their satisfaction level as 'moderate.'

Moreover, the students expected to enjoy educational facilities, sports facilities, activities run by YUSU (York University Student Union) and CGP at a high level, but their satisfaction levels were rated lower, especially the items of enjoying sports facilities and activities or events run by YUSU being rated as 'moderate.'



3.1.3.2 English-Skills Improvement

This study does not statistically compare improvement of each language skill. The students rated the pre-course and post-course surveys through their own perceptions of their language-skills improvement.

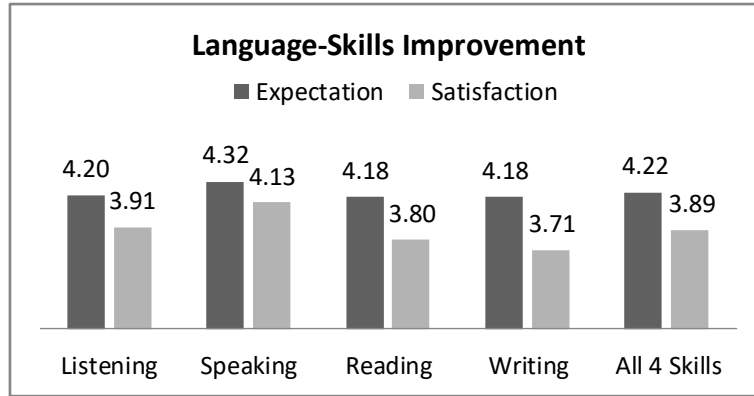


Figure 3. Student expectations and satisfaction with language-skills improvement

The students rated expectations and satisfaction related to improving all four skills as high. However, viewed with more detailed-oriented eyes, the pre-course mean-scores were higher than 4 in all areas, while the post-course mean-scores were all lower than 4 (3.71-3.91) correspondently, except that of speaking skills (4.13).

In short, the students perceived that their speaking skills improved significantly, while writing skills were the least improved.

3.1.3.3 Self-satisfaction

Table 2. Student expectations and satisfaction related to self-satisfaction

You ...	Expectation (Pre)		Satisfaction (Post)	
	\bar{X}	Meaning	\bar{X}	Meaning
-feel more confident using English	4.46	high	4.29	high
-have improved English proficiency for your daily lives	4.61	very high	4.29	high
-have improved English proficiency for further studies	4.64	very high	3.93	high
-have improved English proficiency for job applications	4.25	high	4.04	high
-have improved English proficiency for working in a future career	4.61	very high	3.89	high
-have learned about different cultures from native speakers	4.11	high	4.04	high

Table 2. (continued) Student expectations and satisfaction related to self-satisfaction

You ...	Expectation (Pre)		Satisfaction (Post)		
	\bar{X}	Meaning	\bar{X}	Meaning	
-have more connections with international friends	4.29	high	3.54	high	
-have good connections with your host family	4.50	high	4.11	high	
-have learned and relaxed while travelling to places	4.57	very high	4.36	high	
-have spent your vacation period wisely	4.61	very high	4.54	very high	
-have got good grades in your English courses	4.68	very high	4.05	high	
-are proud of having studied abroad	4.36	high	4.11	high	
-are certain that the programme was worth the money you spent	4.61	very high	3.46	moderate	
	Average	4.48	high	4.05	high

The students had very high expectations of improving their English proficiency for their daily lives, for further studies, and for working in future careers, and their expectations were met at a high level. They rated high expectations and satisfaction with the chance to learn about various cultures, learn and relax while traveling, have good connections with their host family and international friends, and feel proud of having studied abroad. Their expectations and satisfaction were correspondingly very high in terms of spending time wisely during their vacation. However, there was a fairly large gap in their opinions about the worthiness of the money they spent on the programme; their expectations were high, but their satisfaction was rated moderate.

3.2 Results from Teachers' Perceptions

Two regular teachers of the course were requested to give some feedback on similar items to those asked about in the student questionnaire. However, the teacher version asked for *the teachers' perceptions of the CGP six-week programme for Thai learners* instead of their expectations and satisfaction. All the questionnaire items were paralleled with the student version.

The overall mean-score for the 80 items was 3.84, equivalent to 'high.' Nevertheless, there were many items that the teachers rated 5 (very high). For instance, both teachers agreed that the students were proud of having studied at CGP, the programme was worth the money they spent, students got fair treatment in terms of equality and diversity, and they could complain in case of experiencing emotional, or mental-health difficulties.

When comparing the teachers' perceptions in accordance with the students' opinions on each component of the program, the average scores are presented in the Table 3.



Table 3. Student expectations, satisfaction and teachers' perceptions of the six-week programme

Category	Student Expectations	Student Satisfaction	Teachers' Perceptions
Language Enhancement	4.57	3.85	2.83
Culture	3.87	3.94	4.00
Employability skills	4.08	4.03	4.10
Project	3.79	3.95	4.50
IELTS	4.29	4.22	4.50
Assessment	4.23	3.79	4.50
University life	4.25	3.40	3.78
Listening skills	4.20	3.91	3.62
Speaking skills	4.32	4.13	3.94
Reading skills	4.18	3.80	3.00
Writing skills	4.18	3.71	3.00
Self-satisfaction	4.88	4.05	4.27
	4.24	3.90	3.84

By the end of the programme, the students and teachers had already shared some perceptions. The parallel questionnaires give comparative ratings of each main component.

For the syllabus and assessment, the highest ranking perception of the teachers goes equally to the IELTS, Project, and Assessment aspects. Employability skills ranked fourth, followed by Culture. The most distinct rating is on the course called English-Language Enhancement. The students had very high expectations for this course and their satisfaction level was fairly lower, while the teachers' perception of their improvement was the lowest.

The university-life category receives higher ranking from the teachers. In terms of language discrete skills, the teachers agreed with the students that they perceived significant improvements in speaking skills, while writing skills were the least improved.

Nevertheless, in the area of self-satisfaction, the teachers rated many items in the questionnaire higher than those of the students, resulting in higher mean-scores of 4.27 and 4.05 respectively. Some examples that the teachers rated 'very high' include learning from writing a journal, getting fair treatment in terms of equality and diversity, learning about different cultures from native speakers, having more connections with international friends, being proud of having studied at CGP, and the programme being worth the money they had spent.

However, in the open-ended section, the students may have been overwhelmed with 80 questionnaire items and they gave no response, while both teachers had positive opinions on the students' improvement. One of the teachers wrote:

All the students showed real progress over the 6-week course, especially when speaking. They were much more confident, and both pronunciation and intonation improved which was a weak area for some. Great performances in the final presentations, and employability interviews also highlighted how useful these components are.

Finally, just the whole experience of living and travelling in a foreign country, and using a foreign language can only but help them in any future endeavour they might undertake.

Here are some comments from another teacher:

Students have really improved their confidence in both speaking English and their overall ability to interact with people from various countries. Their presentations were truly impressive, and I think they got the most out of doing these.

Furthermore, I think (hope) they will now be more motivated to continue with their English acquisition work in the future.

For me as a teacher, I feel their motivation, confidence and maturity have greatly improved, and I see this as more important than grammar accuracy, etc.

3.3 Results from Student Interview

Two students who were especially chosen to share their opinions about the programme were the students who had, in the previous year, participated in a similar programme at two different institutions in Vancouver, Canada and in Canterbury, UK. Their ideas are presented below.

3.3.1 Learning Opportunities

At CGP, all the classes were very good, but being a closed-group gave little chance to mix with other nationalities. They met other students only an hour a week on Wednesday in the ICA (International Conversation Afternoon). They engaged in conversation as instructed by the teachers, but no real friendships developed. Very few spent time together subsequently.

In Canada, all the classes were very good. Students had opportunities to mix with other nationalities. There were many classes in the same building and more chances to make friends. Cultural Assistants (CAs), who had great personalities and could genuinely be very good friends, facilitated the stay both in class and outside class. The students also got advantages of the “English Only” policy of the institute. Simply put, students were not allowed to speak languages other than English within the premises. CAs seemed to be ‘Big Brothers’, rushing to join in the students’ conversations once they overheard a different language being used, and the students



had to switch to an English conversation immediately. The CAs were actually Canadian university student volunteers who were genuinely fascinated by having international friends.

In Canterbury, all the classes were very good. There were a lot of chances to mix with people of other nationalities in the morning class, while the afternoon class was a closed-group. The school was near the city main tourist attraction – the Canterbury Cathedral, which is very different from a Buddhist temple, giving them the feeling of ‘being abroad’.

3.3.2 Daily Life and Weekend

The two girls agreed that there was not much difference during the weekdays. All three institutions required 100% attendance. The students had to join all the classes and activities organized for them. CGP arranged a bus to take the students to visit tourist attractions on Thursdays with some preparation about the places on Wednesdays in class. Canada arranged a few visits to nearby museums and parks once a week during class hours, and they also made CAs chat with the students, arrange city trips as the students desired, but, similarly, neither Canada nor York arranged weekend trips. Canterbury arranged short trips on Wednesday afternoons and excursions to other cities such as London, Cambridge, and Brighton on five Saturdays. Both girls admitted that they enjoyed the experience of the previous year from where each had been, and they also loved York experience.

3.3.3 Host Families and Culture

Both students enjoyed the stay with their host families. In Canada and Canterbury, the students stayed full-board with the families; they got bed, breakfast, packed lunch and evening meal. At CGP, the agreement was on half-boarding; it included bed, breakfast and evening meal – no packed lunch. The best time of the day was dinner time, when they could chat and share their experience with the host families. Both girls spent their weekends on their own, but they also mentioned that a few friends were so lucky at having host families who spent some time with them, showing them around to certain places on Sundays. A few of their friends had developed close ties and still kept in touch with their host families although neither girl had been in contact with their previous host families. They said that it was not because they did not feel close to the host families, but it was just their preference of cell-phone apps to writing letters. Both former families were tended by senior citizens, who did not use much hi-tech communication.

In addition, at CGP two Thai students were placed in one host family, which may have been due to agreement between LITU and CGP. They described their feelings about having another Thai student sharing the same host family in two ways. First, they felt secure to have someone to talk to in Thai, share the same experience, and help solve problems if any occurred. On the contrary, they realized that they missed the chance of putting all their effort into English use; they tended to rely on the other student to speak for them or felt reserved about expressing ideas or opinions, being afraid that theirs would be less relevant or coherent. They thought being with a

non-Thai with the host family would have helped them increase their confidence in using the target language.

In terms of culture, one of the two said she had learned a lot from both programmes' experiences. She felt more confident being out on her own participating in local activities. Another girl mentioned her wrong preconceptions of Englishmen as appearing in the novels she had read. She had innocently stereotyped adult Englishmen in black attire carrying black umbrellas to everywhere they went.

In addition, although understanding problems such as time allocation and other limitations in organizing a short-course programme for mixed groups, both students disliked closed-group learning. They felt like they were sitting in a classroom in Thailand, although the class was comparatively and favourably small, fourteen learners per class. They wanted opportunities to mingle with students from other nationalities and develop lasting friendships with international friends. They had not been aware - in other words, 'had forgotten' - that their summer course was during the university vacation, when most students are not on campus. To them, York University is a nice beautiful place but very quiet. That explained why they rated moderate the item concerned with enjoying events organized by the York University Student Union (YUSU).

4. Summary of the Findings

To be concise, this study found that the students were highly satisfied with the programme, although the level of satisfaction rated slightly lower than that of their expectations. The satisfaction levels ranked from the highest to the lowest are IELTS, Employability, Project, Culture, Language, and Assessment. The teachers ranking is slightly different from that of the students, starting with IELTS, Assessment, Project, Employability, Culture, and Language. Both the students and teachers perceived that the students' speaking skills improved the most whereas writing skills improved the least. The students rated all items in the areas of self-satisfaction high except that the worthiness of the money they spent for the programme was rated moderate, while the teachers rated that same area very high. The two interviewed students pointed out a few interesting different aspects compared with a former programme they had participated in.

5. Discussion

The opinions of the students and teachers joining the programme appear to be favourable; i.e. almost all of their expectations were met. This part, thus, draws upon only a few remarkable areas worth emphasizing.

5.1 Improved Speaking Skills

Although the students and teachers seemed to agree that the Language-Skills Enhancement component did not help improve their language skills dramatically, it was ascertained that the students increased their confidence in speaking. This possibly proves that a learner can acquire a language faster through immersion. A recent research study in an Asian context supports this finding. Luan and Guo (2011) tried to create a full time English environment both inside and outside class for a group of



students for one year. The pre- and post-test results proved that the immersion teaching model greatly enhanced the students' language ability. The students also showed higher self-evaluation and more confidence than the control group regarding oral communication skills.

Another aspect in class that may help improve the students' speaking skills is the intensity of the class meetings. It appears that learning English in six weeks is as good as or even more productive than a semester-long course. The students were more focused, not being involved with other subjects and 'home' matters; moreover, the teacher-student relationships seemed to be authentic and caring, which helps create an atmosphere in which it is comfortable for students to speak more and participate more fully in classroom activities.

Moreover, the opportunities for second language acquisition when one is studying abroad follow many of the ten general principles for successful instructed learning summarized by Ellis (2005, pp. 33-42). Some examples include: successful instructed language learning requires extensive L2 input, successful instructed language learning also requires opportunities for output, the opportunity to interact in the L2 is central to developing L2 proficiency, etc. The students of this study were exposed to extensive input, lots of output and interaction opportunities in English throughout the whole period of six weeks. It is no doubt that their language competence had significantly increased.

Thus, it is no wrong to recommend that students of higher education in an EFL country such as Thailand be made aware of the importance of spending more outside-class time in an English-friendly environment. They can even try to create opportunities to converse in English, rather than in Thai, with peers, teachers and foreigners for more interaction opportunities in using the target language.

5.2 Most Valued Component -- Academic IELTS Skills

This component seemed to be valued the most in the student views and teachers' perceptions. For students, the following reasons may help explain why they rated the Academic IELTS Skills component with the highest satisfaction.

5.2.1 Students' Understanding of the Importance of IELTS

It is generally known that IELTS is evidence accepted by many organizations worldwide for educational, immigration, and professional purposes. Having successfully taken an IELTS test, a person can apply to study at many international schools or universities. Many employers in professional bodies recognize and ask for this English language test on their admission requirements. The student participants are on the stepping stone of planning either to further their studies or to work in an organization in the near future. Thus, they should be willing to seize the opportunity to be trained in familiarizing themselves with and developing the exam skills which, in turn, results in the teachers' perceptions that their students pay close attention to the component.

5.2.2 Students' Readiness for a New and Different Challenge

In their regular English classes, the course coverage is usually determined by the syllabus. None of the IELTS exam format has ever been introduced. Only students who are willing to spend their outside-class time and extra money may have sought out an opportunity to take an IELTS exam-preparation class somewhere privately. When the IELTS-skills component is included in the programme, and the participants also have a chance to take a practice test and get feedback by their scores being equated with the IELTS bands, it should be a beneficial and new challenge for them to take on.

From both perceptions about the IELTS importance and challenge, it may be worth considering IELTS preparation a beneficial addition to the syllabus of a university's regular programme.

5.3 Employability Skills Development

Since this component was rated closely in terms of expectations and satisfaction, it is worth investigating more deeply into the merits of such a component. The teachers trained students various skills involving job searching and application procedure, and at the end of the course the students were interviewed as if they were trying to be a student seeking internship at CGP. They got constructive feedback afterwards.

According to Di Pietro, 2013 (cited Martherly, 2005), study abroad programs make students become more confident, and help them perform better at job interviews. This is also demonstrated by the fact that students often talk about their international experience to show to employers how this has helped them to develop problem-solving skills. Di Pietro also found in his study that an international educational experience may provide individuals with a great opportunity to develop marketable skills, for example, intercultural competence, global awareness, and foreign language skills.

5.4 Homogenous Classes

The only drawback to the programme that the students mentioned in the interview is having all Thai students in the same class. This is inevitable due to management and organization problems. However, if the students could have mixed with other nationalities, their language proficiency would have improved even more. They may have also made more long-lasting international friends. Thus, the feeling of not being able to have made new international connections may possibly be one of the factors that explain why the students rated the value of the money spent as only moderate. They may have felt it unfair to have paid higher tuition fees, and for air fares, traveling, and accommodation expenses to have had only Thai classmates.

However, a key merit of a homogeneous group is that all participants are taking the course with similar purposes, and their goals can be easily reached through a well-planned and carefully-monitored programme.



In conclusion, the six-week programme obviously has served the student needs well, and collaboration among universities should be continually encouraged. As supported by the findings of Bond et al. (2009), the students, who had a chance to study abroad, certainly have a “character-changing” experience. Many of them have had opportunities to build confidence, to broaden their horizons intellectually, personally, or financially, and to better position themselves to get future education or employment benefits. Nevertheless, it may be interesting to find from further studies attempting a long-term follow-up to compare some particular areas between abroad and non-abroad experienced students.

About the Author

Sripathum Noom-ura is an Associate Professor of the Language Institute, Thammasat University. Her main interests include Professional Development (PD), Project-Based Approach (PBL), teaching and developing materials for ESP courses in the area of science and engineering, and conducting classroom research.

References

- Anderson, P. H., Lawton, L., Rexeisen, R. J., & Hubbard, A. C. (2006). Short-term study abroad and intercultural sensitivity: A pilot study. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 30(4), 457-469.
Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2005.10.004>
- Bond, S., Gigrah, A., Burrow, J., Ingersoll, M., Vander Muhlen, C., Spaling, M., & Areemanpattnil, S. (2009). *World of learning: Canadian post-secondary students and the study-abroad experience*. The Canadian Bureau for International Education. Retrieved from <http://www.trentu.ca/teaching/resources/documents/StudyingAbroad.pdf>
- Crhanová, I. (2007). *Some of the main benefits of study abroad*. (Bachelor thesis). Masaryk University, Faculty of Education, Department of English Language and Literature. Retrieved from https://is.muni.cz/th/84121/pedf_b/some_of_the_main_benefits_of_study_abroad__bachelor_thesis.pdf
- Di Pietro, G.D. (2013). Do study abroad programs enhance the employability of graduates? *IZA Discussion Paper No. 7675* (presented at the 2013 WPEG conference in Sheffield and the 2013 EALE conference in Turin).
- Doorbar, A. (2003). The U.S. study-abroad market: What are the barriers to purchase? *IIE Networker, Fall*, 58-60.
- Dwyer, M. M. (2004). More is better: The impact of study-abroad program duration. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, X, 151-163.
Retrieved from [https://www.iesabroad.org/system/files/More%20is%20better%20\(Dwyer,%202004\).pdf](https://www.iesabroad.org/system/files/More%20is%20better%20(Dwyer,%202004).pdf)
- Elder, C., & O'Loughlin, K. (2003). Investigating the relationship between intensive English language study and band-score gain on IELTS. *IELTS Research*



Reports, 3, 207-254.

- Ellis, R. (2005). *Instructed second language acquisition: A literature review*. Retrieved from <https://www-leland.stanford.edu/~hakuta/Courses/Ed388%20Website/Resources/Instructional%20Resources/Ellis%20Instructed-second-language%20-%20latest%20version.pdf>
- Hopkins, J. R. (1999). Studying abroad as a form of experiential education. *Liberal Education*, 85, 36-41.
- International English Language Testing System [IELTS]. (2002). *The IELTS handbook*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, British Council, IDP Australia.
- Kotler, P. (2003). *Marketing management*. (5th Ed.). New Jersey: Pearson.
- Krashen, S. D. (2009). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. First internet edition (printed edition 1982, Oxford: Pergamon). Retrieved from http://www.sdkrashen.com/content/books/principles_and_practice.pdf
- Luan, Y., & Guo, X. (2011). A study on the application of the immersion teaching model to EFL learners in institutions of higher learning. *English Language Teaching*, 4(1), 152-161. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v4n1p152>
- Swain, M. (1993). The output hypothesis: Just speaking and writing aren't enough. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 50(1), 158-164.
- Tamas, A. (2014). Advantages of study abroad from the students' perspective. *International Journal of Teaching and Education*, 2(4), 67-88. Retrieved from http://www.iises.net/download/Soubory/IJOTE/V2N4/pp67-88_ijoteV2N4.pdf
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Retrieved from http://www.cles.mlc.edu.tw/~cerntcu/099-curriculum/Edu_Psy/EP_03_New.pdf
- Williams, T. R. (2005). Exploring the impact of study abroad on students' intercultural communication skills: Adaptability and sensitivity. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 9(4), 356-371. doi: 10.1177/1028315305277681